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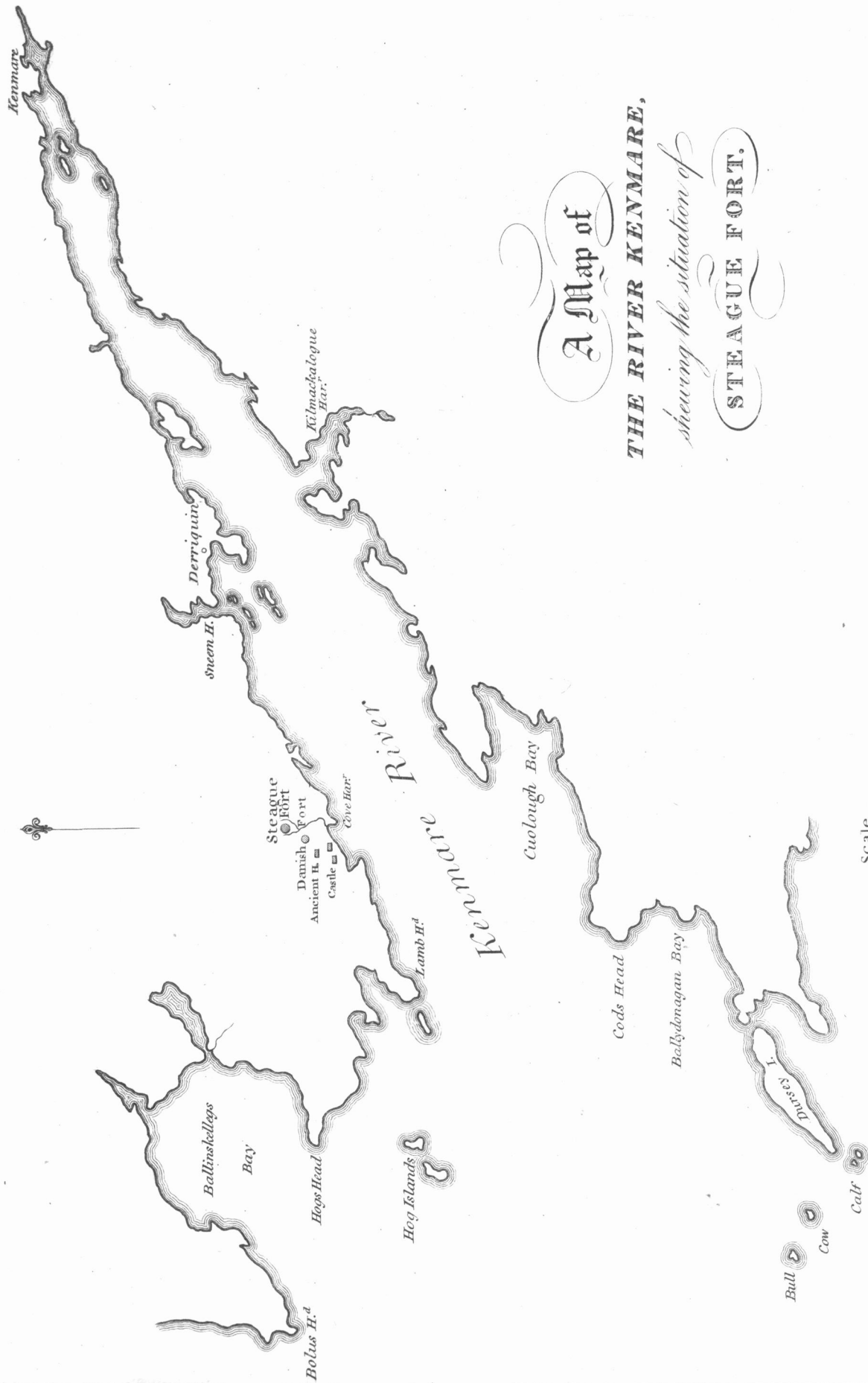
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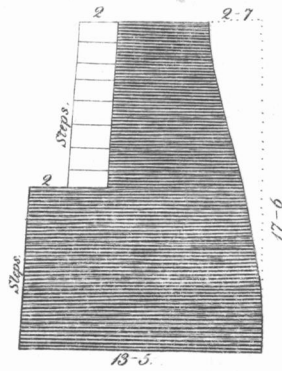
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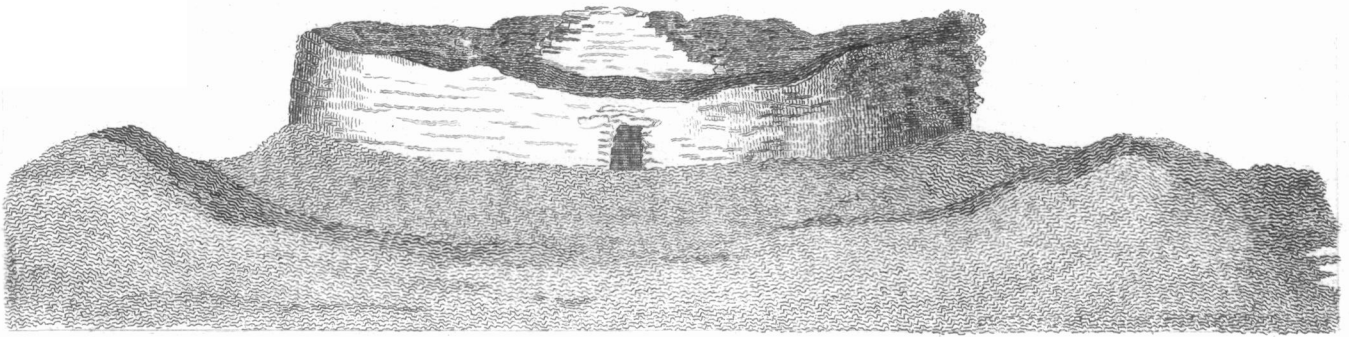
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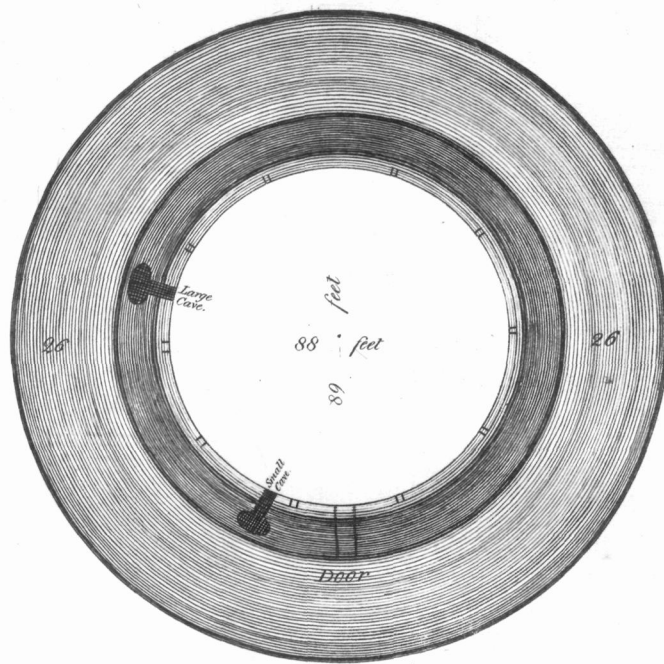
A Map of
THE RIVER KENMARE,
showing the situation of
STEAGUE FORT.



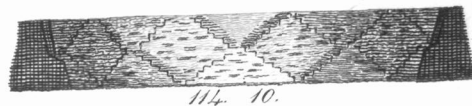
*Section of the Wall
upon a larger Scale
10 feet to an Inch.*



*Steaque Forte in its present State
from recollection. Scale 32 feet to an Inch.*

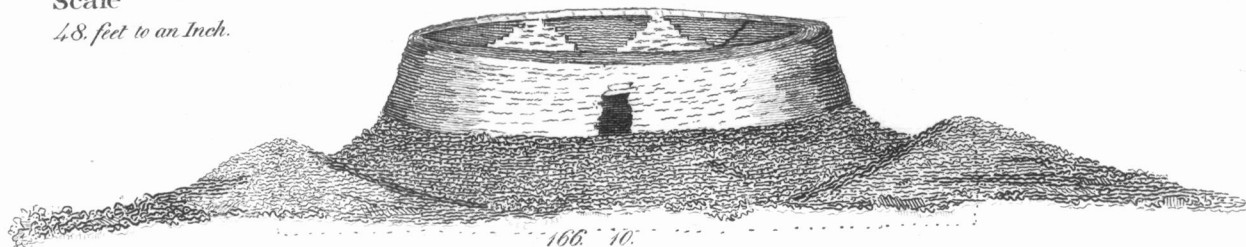


Ground Plan

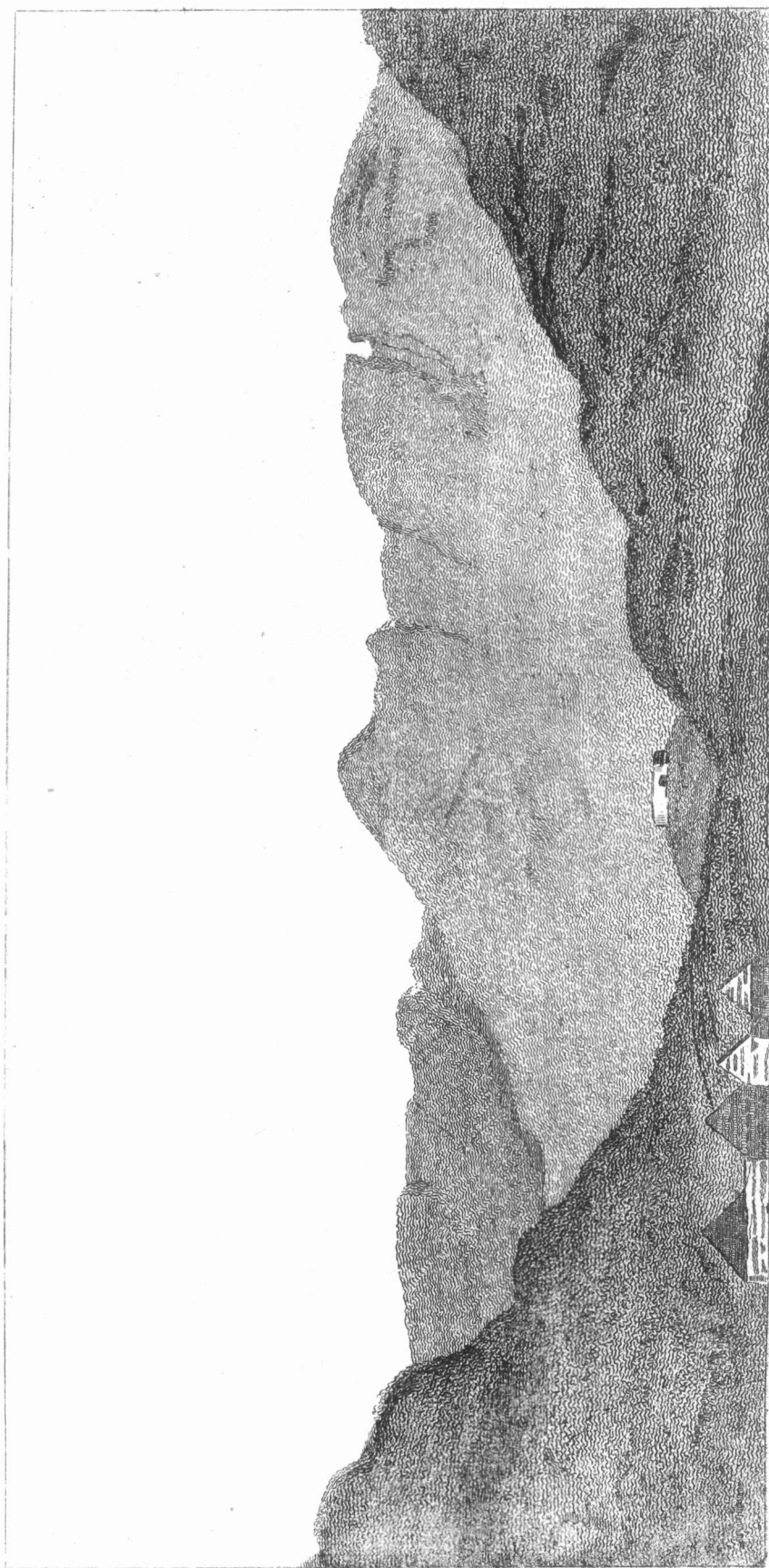


Section

Scale
48 feet to an Inch.



Elevation
Shewing the Inside.



Steagoe Fort from the South.

Description of a remarkable Building, on the north side of Kenmare river, commonly called Staigue Fort. By F. C. Bland, Esq. of Derriquin.

Read November 19, 1821.

THIS singular and interesting structure, which has latterly excited a great deal of curiosity amongst antiquaries, is situated nearly in the western extremity of the county of Kerry, in the barony of Dunkeron, and parish of Kilcrohane, upon the north side of the river Kenmare, in Lat. $51^{\circ} 46' 0''$ N. and Long. $9^{\circ} 53' 20''$ west of Greenwich. It is a circular building, raised with the stone of the surrounding country, (a silicious slate, not splitting into thin laminæ) bearing no marks whatsoever of a tool; and, though evidently constructed with a consummate degree of regularity and ingenuity, yet as obviously built before masonry had become a cultivated art. Its local situation is very imposing. It stands upon a hill comparatively low, between four and five hundred feet above the level of the sea, in a kind of basin or rather amphitheatre of lofty mountains; open to the sea on the south, with a gradual descent to it, and distant about a mile and a half from the coast. When the appearance of the country, which is barren and uninviting, is considered, it must create surprise, what could have been the inducement to erect *such a structure* in such a place; and, when the traveller, whose curiosity has supported him through a long journey, the latter part of which for ten or twelve miles has been through a

wild, uncultivated, though not an uninteresting country, first approaches it, he experiences a sensation of disappointment. For it stands a single object on a hill, and from its figure (being round) producing but little effect of light and shade; and, having no familiar object by which to measure its magnitude, and its importance being rather diminished by the extent and desolation of the surrounding scenery, he attaches a meaner opinion to it than it deserves. But when he enters it, he is struck with astonishment; and his imagination almost instantly transports him to distant ages lost in remote antiquity. He vainly endeavours to figure, in his "mind's eye," the beings who erected it, their manners, habits, and costume; until, "lost and bewildered in the fruitless search," his mind returns to sober investigation, again to lapse into conjecture. This effect is not lost by familiarity:—I have visited it a hundred times, and have always experienced the same sensation.

The plan, which I have annexed, and which has the advantage of accurate measurement, will, I hope, give some idea of the building. You enter by a door six feet high, by four feet six inches wide at top, and five feet at the bottom, through a wall thirteen feet five inches thick, into an apparently circular area of eighty-eight feet one way by eighty-nine feet the other; but this difference of diameter is so small in proportion to its size, that it appears perfectly circular. The periphery is divided into ten compartments of steps or seats, ascending to the top of the surrounding wall in the shape of the letter X, through one of which you enter. The circumference is not accurately divided into these compartments; but the difference between them does not offend the eye at your first entrance, nor do you perceive it until you come to measure and examine the building in detail.

In one part, where the wall is perfect, it is surmounted by a pro-

jecting eve stone, which, when complete, must have added greatly to the effect of the whole. This is indeed the only attempt at ornament in the entire building.

In two of the compartments above mentioned, are two small doors: the one, two feet three inches wide by three feet one inch high; the other, two feet eight inches square. These open into two cells, in the interior of the wall, of different dimensions, both of them seven feet eight inches high: but one, seven feet ten inches long by five feet wide; the other, twelve feet long by four feet eight inches wide. These are constructed with flags, the one projecting over the other, until they come to the top, where a single flag finishes. Their figure is oval; and, though built, as before observed, without cement, they are water proof. This completes the description of the inside. On the outside, a moat or fosse, of twenty-six feet wide and six feet three inches deep, surrounds the whole building. This moat is sunk into the gravel, and the side nearest the building slopes up to the foundation about fourteen feet; which, being merely laid upon the surface of the ground, and not sunk, on account of the natural swell of the hill, elevates the building above the opposite side of the moat. The wall rises on the outside, upon an average, about eighteen feet. The inequality in its height is occasioned by the irregularities of the ground, upon the original surface of which it was built, it being, where perfect, level on the top. In that part, where I took my measurement, it is seventeen feet six inches high. It is remarkable that it does not rise perpendicularly; but batters two feet seven inches to the top: not in a straight direction, but with a curve, (expressed in the plan but difficult to be described,) which has a very striking effect. It also batters on the inside, about three feet ten inches, so that it reduces from thirteen feet at the bottom to seven feet at the top.

On the outside it is very smooth, and built with the greatest degree of accuracy and correctness, so that no deviation from the regularity of the curve appears in any part of it. The stones are small ; and the joints are all filled with splinters of stone, either hammered in so strongly, or pressed so closely by the weight of the superincumbent structure, that it is nearly impossible to pull one of them from its place. It is very extraordinary that the interior part of the wall seems to have been filled very carelessly, and little attention paid to laying the stones on the flat, so that one would be inclined to think, the weight of the internal material would, in time, have burst the sides out ; and yet in no place has it given in the smallest degree, though it must have been standing for ages. The only dilapidation is evidently by the hands of man ; for, until about thirty years back, when I first took it under my care, it was used as a pound. But still it is surprisingly perfect. In no place is the wall lower than ten feet ; and in one, it is perfect to the projecting eve stone, which originally finished it upon the top on the inside. It has no appearance of having ever had a battlement.

This is as accurate a description as I can give of this interesting structure. I have now to observe, that it is the only one of this peculiar construction remaining, in this country, in any state of preservation ; and I believe none have been discovered in any other part of the kingdom. There are indeed in its neighbourhood, each about three miles from it, in opposite directions, two stone forts in a state of barbarous dilapidation, which seem to have been built about the same time, and with nearly the same care ; but they do not shew the curve on the outside, nor do they appear to have had similar stairs or seats on the inside. One of them has the appearance of having originally had seats of different elevations all

round, in the nature of a regular amphitheatre ; but this, which as well as Staigue, is situated on my ground, is so dilapidated that the seats are scarcely to be traced ; and I should nearly doubt of their having existed at all, but for the testimony of a very old man who, some years back, assured me he remembered to see them much more perfect, and described them accurately. I am told by my friend Mr. Nimmo, that there is another stone fort, at Ballycarbery in Iverah, with seats round it, but I have not seen it.

The name of this building is Staigue or Staig, and the farm on which it stands is also called Staigue ; the etymology of which word I have not been able to discover satisfactorily. I understand Mr. Leslie Foster says it signifies steps or stairs, which, if an authentick meaning for the word, would be very satisfactory indeed ; but looks so like a “ palpable hit” that it ought to be supported by something more than assertion. In modern Irish it signifies a bleak, dreary, or desolate place ; but this meaning throws no light upon the subject ; and in this, and every thing else, we learn nothing concerning it from tradition.*

Staigue Fort, as it is called, has been a long time a lion in my family ; but the first public notice of it was taken by my late respected friend Mr. Pelham, a gentleman of considerable talent and curious research, who was engaged in writing a history of Kerry : but whose lamented death prevented his completing the work, and

* I have lately learned, that amongst the old people of the country, it is called *Staig a nair*, probably a corruption of *S'tig an air*, or the “windy house” ; literally, “it is the windy house” or habitation. This is more likely, from the circumstance of a gap in the mountain, just over it, being called *Barney Guhee*, or “the windy gap”.—Or it may be a corruption of *S'tig on air*, as being a shelter from storms, or of *S'tig an athair*, (pronounced without sounding the *th*) “the house of the father”, or “the father's house” (a temple): but the first seems to me most probable.

This mode of denominating places, from accidental circumstances in their situation, is very ancient. Thus Homer *νημοισσαν Ενισπην & Ιλιον νημοισσαν*—Ιλ. L. 2. l. 606 & L. iii. l. 305.

whose papers have unfortunately been lost. He made an accurate ground plan and elevation of this building, which he sent to the late General Vallancey; who pronounced it to be a Phœnician Amphitheatre, and deemed it a strong support to his favorite theory respecting the colonisation of this kingdom. He never saw the building, and, if he had, might have changed his opinion.

About nine years back Mr. Leslie Foster visited this country, and passed Staigue by unnoticed; but, being prevailed upon by me, he was reluctantly induced to return and see it. He afterwards, as I am told, published, in some periodical work or newspaper, an account of it; in which, being ignorant, I suppose, of what I have stated respecting Mr. Pelham's correspondence with General Vallancey, he considered himself as the first discoverer of this ancient structure.

He presented the Dublin Society with a model of it in wood, in which the measurement, I presume, is correct, and which gives a good general idea of the building, but, being worked smooth, may lead the hasty observer into the error of believing it to be built with cut stone. Had it been executed on the spot, and carved after the original, something in the manner in which Dutch toys are finished, it would be a perfect representation.

So far from having any appearance of cut stone, it is obvious that no tool whatsoever was used in its construction, and every stone in it retains the figure it possessed when detached from the adjoining mountain. The most ignorant modern mason, laying the foundation of a circular building, would describe it by a line playing round a centre; but this, I believe, was laid out by the eye alone, and there is no accuracy of measurement in any part of the structure. Even the doors entering into similar apartments, are of different dimensions; and yet not so materially different as to suggest

their having been intended for different purposes. With all this, it forms a perfect whole ; and I have no hesitation in saying, that the best modern masons, with the same materials, unassisted by modern implements and contrivances, could not erect any thing like it. Yet it is evident, from the manner in which the interior part of the wall is laid, that, at the time of its erection, the art of masonry must, as already mentioned, have been in its infancy. There was a singular contrivance to facilitate the introduction of materials to the interior of the structure, during the time of its erection. A large space was left open on one side, which was evidently filled up after the rest of the building was completed. This would have been very effectual for the introduction of wheel carriages, as it is on that side from which they could best approach it : but, as I cannot think such implements were in use at the time it was built, it impresses me with the conviction, that there must have been a great number of hands employed in the work ; for a smaller number could, without inconvenience, have supplied materials through the door way, which was fully large enough for the purpose, and equally accessible.

Various conjectures have been made by curious visitors, as to the original purpose for which this extraordinary edifice was erected ; whether it was intended for a place of defence, of public exhibition, or of religious worship. The first idea that would strike every body is, that it was intended as a place of defence and security, and this conjecture is mainly supported by the moat, with which it is surrounded ; and I should think it can hardly be doubted, that it must have been a place of great strength, at a remote period, when modern instruments of destruction were unknown. A vicinity to water must have been indispensable to a place of defence ; and in that respect the situation of this building is peculiarly judicious,

for two mountain streams nearly surround it, at a distance of not two hundred yards, and form a junction farther down in front of the door. I do not think it would be possible to turn these streams from their course. A military gentleman observed, that it would be assailable by slings, or perhaps by arrows from the adjoining mountain. This may be the case, and slings and arrows are the earliest weapons of war, but it is very difficult to fix upon a situation totally unassailable.

As a place of public exhibition, or as general Vallancey stiles it, an amphitheatre, we are greatly puzzled to conceive how such a structure could have been erected for such a purpose in such a place; and the cells are too small to admit any beasts but wolves or wild boars. However it is observable, that the stones used in the outside of the wall are not in general so large as those on the inside, and the projecting eve on the inside was obviously intended for ornament, as for defence it would have been placed on the outside, and have been constructed with long and weighty stones. It is also to be observed, that no contrivance for fastening the door of entrance appears ever to have been used; at least there are no holes for transverse bars, or any other contrivance now remaining.

The last conjecture is equally difficult to support. We know of no antient place of worship like it; and it has no appearance of a Druidical remain. I must not here omit the suggestion of my learned and ingenious friend Mr. Nimmo—It struck him, that it may have been intended for an observatory. How it could have been applied to this purpose, I shall leave to himself to explain; but I believe the idea occurred to him from a supposition, that the door would be found exactly to face the meridian sun. In this conjecture he is supported by fact. I have lately ascertained the bearing of the door to be south twenty-nine degrees west by the compass,

which, assuming the variation to be something more than two points and a half, makes the door face south. Mariners allow the variation on this coast to be two and a half points, as sufficiently exact for the purposes of navigation: but I have, by a mean of three observations, found it to be within a few seconds of twenty-nine degrees; and the difference of a few seconds is, in this case, of little consequence. For the jambs of the door being built of rough undressed stones, it is impossible so correctly to hit the centre on both sides as to ascertain its bearing with mathematical certainty: but I have no hesitation in asserting, that it was originally built with the intention of facing the meridian. This circumstance is most extraordinary, and well worthy of consideration. It could never have been the result of mere chance. Whether it makes most for Mr. Nimmo's conjecture, or goes to show, that the people who erected the building were fire-worshippers, I shall not take upon me to determine. It certainly affords a strong presumption, that they were not entirely ignorant of Astronomy. For the satisfaction of those, who may be inclined to doubt the fact, I have, in the subjoined note, detailed the method by which I have obtained the bearing of the door way.*

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* Having suspended a plummet from the centre of the door on the outside, I suspended another from the centre on the inside, with a distance of about ten feet between them. I then placed my instrument (an excellent circumferenter with sights, and having a very steady needle,) near the wall on the opposite side; and, having levelled it, cut the two lines suspended from the door way. I then measured my line from the door to the opposite wall; and, fixing a pole in the centre, I found it to be an exact line by my instrument, with the two plummets. I then proved my line by measuring a diameter at right angles to the spot where my pole stood; and found it to be exactly in the centre of the building. I then took the bearing of the door by my instrument, which I had never stirred; and found it to be south twenty-nine degrees west.

REMARK BY MR. NIMMO.

The observation of my ingenious friend, Mr. Bland, shows I was not wrong in my conjecture

I do not pretend to be an antiquarian ; and it is with great diffidence, and no small degree of apprehension, that I venture a conjecture upon the subject : but, having given so complete a description of this building, and furnished ground for the learned to turn up, I think I may be pardoned for my temerity in hazarding an opinion. Conjectures are allowable, where as yet nothing has appeared but conjecture. I suppose, at some very distant period, a colony (Phœnicians if you please, possibly about the time they first visited Spain, or previously to it) to have crossed the Atlantic, from the pillars of Hercules, in quest of a settlement, or in pursuit of a country productive of ore ; and, having made the western extremity of Ireland, found the river Kenmare open to receive them. Sailing up this river, they would naturally be inclined to land at the first place that appeared convenient for that purpose. The small bay, at the foot of Staigue, affords the first convenient situation. The shore on either side of the river, until you reach that spot, is absolutely intangible. There, a small opening presents a flat and inviting shore, where they might have landed ; and, finding the country tolerably fertile, and bearing the appearance of containing ore, they might have settled, and built this fort, as a dépôt and place of security. I have been led into this conjecture from the

of the position of the gate. I have no observation of the variation of the compass, at present by me, nearer to Staigue Fort than that on Admiral Knight's chart of Cork harbour, where it is marked $28^{\circ} 10'$. In Kenmare River I know it is somewhat more westerly. It appeared to me, that the structure exhibited a sort of rude graduation of the horizon : first into two hands of five fingers each, each finger into quarters ; and these again into gradi or steps. The cells might be places of shelter for two observers : one to observe the rising sun, and the other his meridian shadow. But I leave this conjecture to be pursued by more able antiquarians.

The exterior mould of the wall has evidently been formed by staking down one end of a cord in the centre of the area, and bringing the other to the exterior face of the wall. This gives both the circular plan, and the particular curve of the profile, until near the top ; where it has been brought nearer the vertical.

circumstance of there being two excavations made into the solid rock, obviously attempts in quest of ore, in the neighbourhood of this fort; both of them executed before the art of mining was understood. One of these, Crohane's cave, (so called by the common people for the country, from their believing it to have been the residence of that saint, from whom the parish takes its name,) is sunk about eight feet into a rock of quartz, decidedly in search of ore, and is situated within a mile of this building. The other is within four hundred yards of it, and is an indentation made into a hard silicious rock. This seems to have been deserted in consequence of the indication of ore having diminished to a mere thread, not six inches long. These attempts seem to have been made in the first and rudest period of the art of mining; and most likely by the occupiers of this fort. These adventurers, disappointed in the great object of their pursuit, and finding nothing else in the country to induce them to remain, might consequently have deserted their settlement; and might have left this structure, and the others of nearly a similar construction, to puzzle antiquarians. The round buildings commonly called Danish forts, though by some denied to be Danish, are to be found every where in this country; and there is one of them within half a mile of Staigue. These may have been built in imitation of the first fort, by the wild natives of the country; and are vastly inferior to them in execution. I am of opinion, that the first inhabitants of this country were Troglodytes, living under ground in caves; an incredible number of which still remain, and very many of which I have myself explored. They are of the rudest structure, though I have seen them with apartments one within the other; and long narrow passages between them, like a rabbit-burrow. I recollect one of them, which consisted of four apartments of an oval shape; each about eight feet long, as well as

I now can recollect, and about six feet wide. There seems to have been some attempt at elegance in the construction of this one. The centre apartment had three more branching from it, at right angles, which, with the passage forming the entrance, gave it the shape of a cross. This was evidently a subterraneous house. Some of these caves have sustaining walls of dry stone works, to confine the sides, and support the flags which form the ceiling. Some of them are excavated into the hard gravel, with the flags resting on no other support; and so low, that you can only *sit* erect in them. That is, from three to four feet from the floor to the ceiling. I have not seen any higher than four feet. If my conjecture be true, they seem to have continued the use of caves, even after they had adopted round forts; for in many of these forts are found similar caves. In one which I opened on my own demesne, I found two, exactly like those I had explored, where no fort at all stood. So similar were they to each other in construction, that no doubt remains upon my mind, that they were executed by the same people, and for the same purpose. I believe them to have been used as dormitories, and dépôts for their most valuable effects; as places of shelter from wild beasts; and as permanent residences, particularly for their women and children. The tradition of the country makes them granaries; but for granaries they could never have been intended, as it would have been very difficult to convey grain into them, through long and narrow passages, not more than two feet square; and, for granaries, where was the necessity of separate apartments inside of each other? It is also scarcely credible that corn, at so early a period, could have been at all in use; and still more incredible, that this country could have produced it.

It may not be uninteresting, and not entirely foreign to my subject to mention, that on the adjoining farm to Staigue, within less than

a mile of it, are the remains of an ancient house, of a very uncommon description. It consists of one apartment, of considerable size, with two doors opposite each other, like our modern cabins; and two small windows. It has no fire-place or chimney, and is built without gables. The roof stood on large beams, placed perpendicularly in the wall, the spaces which they occupied still remaining. It is built with lime made from calcined oyster shells. I once thought, that this house was copied from the old church of Code, situated about a mile from it; but, when I consider that it has no gables; and that, in taking the church for a model, they probably would have adopted a framed roof, in preference to the other clumsy contrivance, I am inclined to think it of an older date. The church, besides, is built with stone lime, which gives it a more recent date. This house I preserve with great care; but there is one more in this country, which will soon share the fate of all mundane structures.

The whole family, cows, pigs, dogs, and horses, we are told, lived promiscuously within the walls of this ample mansion, a custom still remaining amongst the lower orders. A little distance from this house stands an unfinished castle, which tradition tells us (I do not vouch for the fact) was intended, at a more recent period, for the residence of the family which occupied this house; but which, being built through the vanity and ambition of the lady of the soil in the absence of her lord, was by him discontinued at his return home, and never completed. There is also a good modern house on this farm; so that all the changes, from the most rude state of society (if it deserves that name) to its present happy state of improvement, may here be traced.

I have only to add, that from the appearance of the land here, it seems to have been formerly more thickly inhabited than at present; and certainly more so than the surrounding country.